

How Much Will You Change?

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“Mary hasn’t seen a doctor in 20 years!” Donald announced in the spring of 1999, giving her a virtual medal of honour for self-reliance.

He had recently visited a new doctor who was taking patients. Dr. Milligan announced Donald’s blood pressure was too high, and he was incredulous. “No doctor ever told me that before,” he huffed, refusing a prescription.

“If you don’t believe me, check it yourself at the *Pharmasave*,” Dr. Milligan replied. “Come back in a week and we’ll talk.”

The machine registered Donald’s blood pressure as very high. But Donald didn’t want to tuck his tail between his legs, so he didn’t return for that chat; he figured he’d bring his blood pressure down by himself. Two months later, at age 78, he got off the treadmill just as a stroke was beginning. Mary followed suit the following month. He survived for 15 months; she remained in a coma for three days and then died.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in both men and women. Stroke is third, but is the leading cause of disability. Both result from an unhealthy cardio-vascular system the leading causes of which are elevated blood pressure, high

LDL cholesterol, excess weight, inactivity, smoking, drinking, and stress.

If one of these culprits takes hold of us, it's likely others will follow. For example, if we're stressed we might reach for a drink, an extra piece of cake, or even a cigarette. Before we know it, our waist lines expand. The heavier we are, the harder it is to move around, and we subside into inactivity. These unhealthy habits and conditions don't lead only to heart and brain attacks, they also contribute to other chronic ailments such as diabetes and dementia.

We mostly know all this, so the question we confront is this: *What are we willing to do about it?*

In early June, the Canadian Men's Health Foundation (CMHF) launched a program addressing the notion that men aren't as fit as women nor are they as willing to break bad habits. The CMHF website (www.dontchangemuch.ca) seems aimed at attracting men in their forties, offering ten easy steps to improve their physical, mental, and emotional health. For example, number 8 is "shake it off." That's shorthand for removing the salt shaker from the table, a good idea for any age or gender.

But before we gals sit back to watch you guys whip yourselves into shape in ten easy steps, let me report on my recent speedy tour of the Internet seeking differences by age and gender on the main factors that contribute to cardio-vascular and related dread diseases. It turns out that as we gals grow older, we tend to catch up with and even

surpass you guys on several of the leading contributors to heart and brain attacks.

By age 55, about 21% of all women can expect to have a stroke during the remainder of our lives while 17% of men can expect one. What's more, older women are likelier than men to be living alone so our chances of ending our days in long-term care due to stroke disability are higher.

We women don't do any better when it comes to heart attacks. For each of the past 30 years, more women than men have died from heart disease. And women are more likely than men to die from their first heart attack, perhaps because they don't feel chest pain. Instead, the most frequent symptoms reported by women who survived their attack are extreme fatigue before and extreme shortness of breath and weakness during the attack.

In the past, strokes mostly happened to older people, but that's changing. The Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation (<http://www.heartandstroke.com/>) has recently come out with a new finding: While strokes are "most common in people over age 70, during the past decade, strokes in people in their 50s have increased by 24 per cent. Strokes in their 60s increased by 13 per cent. More troubling: recent international studies predict stroke rates among younger people (ages 24–64) will double in the next 15 years."

Donald was right about one thing. We need to start taking better care of ourselves. To do it, though, we should rely on our physician's advice. Some don't have a family doctor, but we can all check our blood pressure at the *Pharmasave*.

If it's elevated or there's shortness of breath, a pharmacist can help decide if it's time to go to Emergency.

The Queen congratulates us when we reach 100, but she gives no badges of bravery to those who announce with pride they haven't seen a physician in 20 years.